

HOMILY
ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHER PROWSE
CATHOLIC ARCHBISHOP OF CANBERRA AND GOULBURN
TUESDAY, 1 OCTOBER 2019
CARMELITE MONASTERY, CANBERRA

Readings:

Zachariah 8:20-23

Luke 9:51-56

In today's Mass we launch the Extraordinary Missionary Month decreed by Pope Francis. We launch this universal initiative of the Holy Father here in the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn on this the memorial of St Therese of the Child Jesus (1873-1897), virgin and doctor of the Church.

Therese Martin, the little flower, was born in Alencon, France in 1873. Her parents are now canonised saints. They are Sts Louis Martin and Zeligue Guerin. They were both canonised together in 2015. We see tremendous coming together of this Extraordinary Missionary Month and the life of St Therese of Lisieux who, with St Francis Xavier, remain universal patrons of the missions.

The seeds of the vocation of St Therese are often pinpointed to Pentecost 1883. The little girl Therese told of the tremendous grace of being healed of serious illness through the intercession of Our Lady of Victories.

She also felt a tremendous grace of intimate union with Christ in 1884 when she made her first Holy Communion.

From such a young age she always wanted to follow her sisters, Pauline and Marie, into Carmel Lisieux.

We know the famous story of her boldly imploring Pope Leo XIII face to face, when she joined the Diocese of Lisieux for a pilgrimage to Rome. Despite being only at the tender age of 15, papal permission was granted. She entered the monastery in Lisieux in 1883 and made her solemn profession on the 8th of September 1890.

But in all this she could see the Grace of God. This is surely a hallmark of Holiness. To see the important moments in one's life as not being manufactured by human effort but as a gift from divine initiative which we call Grace.

In regard to her particular Charism in the Church, it always strikes me that St Therese's Charism was of trusting God through moments of trial. This is seen in her poems, small theatrical performances, her spiritual experience condensed in the "Little Way of Spiritual Childhood" and also the way she accompanied her "missionary brothers" through her sacrifice and prayer intercession.

She always saw and continues to see a missionary vocation to be a "beating heart within the Church that is loved, loves and generates love". Her autobiography after her death, "The Story of Her Soul" clearly illustrates this in hundreds of different ways.

Hers was a life of incessant prayer, meditation on the scriptures, sacramental life and community with her sisters.

Her dying and death also indicates the way that she was able to bring together holiness and missionary life.

On the 3rd of April 1896 the illness started in her body that led eventually to her death. Her words continued to be memorial in the last things that she said, "I am not dying, but entering into life". She died on the 30th of September 1897 at the tender age of 24. Her last words were "My God, I love you".

St Therese of Lisieux was canonised by Pius XI on the 17th of May 1925.

With St Francis Xavier in 1927 she became the universal Patroness of Missions. And then more recently, on the 19th of October 1997, she was made a Doctor of the Church by St John Paul II.

This brief outline of her life, which would be known so well by so many, does however require a reprising in this October Extraordinary Missionary Month.

Surely her great contribution was in the fusion together of the contemplative and the missionary active life that all of us share as Catholic Christians.

The holiness and trust that she so clearly exhibited in her life was always and inseparably linked to her desire for the salvation of all, "especially the poorest". This desire was purely an extension of the Saint with a missionary heart.

From "The Story of Her Soul" we almost feel like we are eavesdropping on a most intimate sentiment of her spiritual life when she says, "I would want to preach on all the five continents simultaneously and even to the most remote islands. I would be a missionary, not for a few years only but from the beginning of creation until the consummation of the ages".

A particular expression of St Therese of Lisieux which means something very important to me is when she proclaimed "You know Lord, that my only ambition is to make you known and loved".

Surely, in this October Extraordinary Month of Missions, we can take this as a motto for our missionary life ... to "make Jesus known and loved".

It is a constant desire to go forth from our encounter with the Lord Jesus and into the world and to spread the perfume and fragrance of Christ to all that we come in contact with and to whom all we pray.

The letter of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Centenary of the Promulgation of the Apostolic Letter "Maximum Illud" on the Activity of Missionaries in the World helps us all to see how the missionary impulse of Therese of Lisieux continues in our own time.

To be a missionary, like St Therese of Lisieux, does not necessarily mean a geographical commitment, although this is a possibility. But there must always be commitment that we have, like St Therese, to become a missionary at heart. Pope Francis in his

promulgation letter quotes St John Paul II's statement to the Bishops of Oceania (that's our area) in "all renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to introversion".

Our dear Holy Father, Pope Francis, with whom the bishops of Australia spent an unforgettable two and a half hours in spontaneous dialogue in recent times at our Ad Limina visit, is always warning us against hiding behind a false shield of holiness that in fact hides all sorts of selfish motives.

In his promulgation letter he says, "May the approaching centenary of that letter serve as an incentive to combat the recurring temptation lurking beneath every form of ecclesial introversion, self-referential retreat into comfort zones, pastoral pessimism and sterile nostalgia for the past. Instead may we be open to the joyful newness of the Gospel".

These words are extremely important as now the Australian Church is well and truly on its journey towards our Australian Plenary Council. We must place our ecclesial life before the searching and searing light of the risen Christ so that all that is not of the Lord, all the things that are shadowy and bind us to egoisms, are to be dispelled.

Let us entrust this Mass now to the Lord and invoke the patroness not only of St Therese of Lisieux, the Patroness of Missionaries, but also Our Lady Help of Christians, the Patroness of Australia.

St Therese of Lisieux pray for us.

Archbishop Christopher Prowse
Catholic Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn